

THE BUSH GOVERNMENT'S SHADOW ARMY

Private military contractors like Blackwater are now part of the Bush Administration's transformed "Total Force" in the USA and abroad, but are operating with virtually no oversight by the US Congress.

by Jeremy Scahill © 2007

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On September 10, 2001, before most Americans had heard of Al-Qaeda or imagined the possibility of a "war on terror", Donald Rumsfeld stepped to the podium at the Pentagon to deliver one of his first major addresses as Defense Secretary under President George W. Bush. Standing before the former corporate executives he had tapped as his top deputies overseeing the high-stakes business of military contracting—many of them from firms like Enron, General Dynamics and The Aerospace Corporation—Rumsfeld issued a declaration of war.

"The topic today is an adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America...." Rumsfeld thundered. "It disrupts the defense of the United States and places the lives of men and women in uniform at risk." He told his new staff: "You may think I'm describing one of the last decrepit dictators of the world... The adversary's closer to home. It's the Pentagon bureaucracy." Rumsfeld called for a wholesale shift in the running of the Pentagon, supplanting the old DoD [Department of Defense] bureaucracy with a new model—one based on the private sector. Announcing this major overhaul, Rumsfeld told his audience: "I have no desire to attack the Pentagon; I want to liberate it. We need to save it from itself."

The next morning, the Pentagon would be attacked, literally, as a Boeing 757—American Airlines Flight 77—smashed into its western wall. Rumsfeld would famously assist rescue workers in pulling bodies from the rubble. But it didn't take long for Rumsfeld to seize the almost unthinkable opportunity presented by 9/11 to put his personal war—laid out just a day before—on the fast track. The new Pentagon policy would emphasise covert actions, sophisticated weapons systems and greater reliance on private contractors. It became known as the Rumsfeld Doctrine. "We must promote a more entrepreneurial approach—one that encourages people to be proactive, not reactive, and to behave less like bureaucrats and more like venture capitalists," Rumsfeld wrote in the summer of 2002 in an article for *Foreign Affairs* titled "Transforming the Military".

Although Rumsfeld was later thrown overboard by the Administration in an attempt to placate critics of the Iraq War, his military revolution was here to stay. Bidding farewell to Rumsfeld in November 2006, Bush credited him with overseeing "the most sweeping transformation of America's global defense posture" since the end of World War II. Indeed, Rumsfeld's trademark "small footprint" approach ushered in one of the most significant developments in modern warfare: the widespread use of private contractors in every aspect of war, including in combat.

The often overlooked subplot of the wars of the post-9/11 period is their unprecedented scale of outsourcing and privatisation. From the moment the US troop build-up began in advance of the invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon made private contractors an integral part of the operations. Even as the government gave the public appearance of attempting diplomacy, Halliburton was prepping for a massive operation. When US tanks rolled into Baghdad in March 2003, they brought with them the largest army of private contractors ever deployed in modern war. By the end of Rumsfeld's tenure in late 2006, there were an estimated 100,000 private contractors on the ground in Iraq—an almost one-to-one ratio with active-duty American soldiers.

To the great satisfaction of the war industry, before Rumsfeld resigned he took the extraordinary step of classifying private contractors as an official part of the US war machine. In the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review report, Rumsfeld outlined what he called a "roadmap for change" at the DoD, which he said had begun to be implemented in 2001. It defined the "Department's Total Force" as "...its active and

reserve military components, its civil servants, and its contractors—constitut[ing] its warfighting capability and capacity. Members of the Total Force serve in thousands of locations around the world, performing a vast array of duties to accomplish critical missions." This formal designation represented a major triumph for war contractors—conferring on them a legitimacy they had never before enjoyed.

Contractors have provided the Bush Administration with political cover, allowing the government to deploy private forces in a war zone free from public scrutiny, with the deaths, injuries and crimes of those forces shrouded in secrecy. The Administration and the Republican-controlled Congress in turn shielded the contractors from accountability, oversight and legal constraints. Despite the presence of more than 100,000 private contractors on the ground in Iraq, only one contractor has been indicted for crimes or violations. "We have over 200,000 troops in Iraq and half of them aren't being counted, and the danger is that there's zero accountability," said Democrat Dennis Kucinich, one of the leading congressional critics of war contracting.

While the past years of Republican monopoly on government have marked a golden era for the industry, those days appear to be ending. Just a month into the new congressional term, leading Democrats were announcing investigations of runaway war contractors. Representative John Murtha, chair of the Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Defense, after returning from a trip to Iraq in late January, said: "We're going to have extensive hearings to find out exactly what's going on with contractors. They don't have a clear mission and they're falling all over each other." Two days later, during confirmation hearings for Gen. George Casey as Army Chief of Staff, Senator Jim Webb declared: "This is a rent-an-army out ther." Webb asked Casey: "Wouldn't it be better for this country if those tasks, particularly the quasi-military gunfighting tasks, were being performed by active-duty military soldiers in terms of cost and accountability?"

Casey defended the contracting system but said armed contractors "are the ones that we have to watch very carefully". Senator Joe Biden, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, has also indicated he will hold hearings on contractors. Parallel to the ongoing investigations, there are several bills gaining steam in Congress aimed at contractor oversight.

Occupying the hot seat through these deliberations is the shadowy mercenary company, Blackwater USA. Unbeknownst to many Americans and largely off the congressional radar,

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Blackwater has secured a position of remarkable power and protection within the US war apparatus. This company's success represents the realisation of the life's work of the conservative officials who formed the core of the Bush Administration's war team, for whom radical privatisation has long been a cherished ideological mission. Blackwater has repeatedly cited Rumsfeld's statement that contractors are part of the "Total Force" as evidence that it is a legitimate part of the nation's "warfighting capability and capacity".

Invoking Rumsfeld's designation, the company has in effect declared its forces above the law—entitled to the immunity from civilian lawsuits enjoyed by the military, but also not bound by the military's court martial system. While the initial inquiries into Blackwater have focused on the complex labyrinth of secretive subcontracts under which it operates in Iraq, a thorough investigation into the company reveals a frightening picture of a politically connected private army that has become the Bush Administration's Praetorian Guard.

Blackwater Rising

Blackwater was founded in 1996 by conservative Christian multimillionaire and ex-Navy SEAL Erik Prince, the scion of a wealthy Michigan family whose generous political donations helped fuel the rise of the religious right and the Republican revolution of 1994. At its founding, the company largely consisted of Prince's private fortune and a vast 5,000-acre plot of land located near the Great Dismal Swamp in Moyock, North Carolina. Its vision was "to fulfill the anticipated demand for government outsourcing of firearms and related security training". In the following years, Prince, his family and his political allies poured money into Republican campaign coffers, supporting the party's takeover of Congress and the ascension of George W. Bush to the presidency.

While Blackwater won government contracts during the Clinton era, which was friendly to privatisation, it was not until the "war on terror" that the company's glory moment arrived. Almost overnight, following September 11, 2001, the company became a central player in a global war. "I've been operating in the training business now for four years and was starting to get a little cynical on how seriously people took security," Prince told Fox News host Bill O'Reilly shortly after 9/11. "The phone is ringing off the hook now."



Among those calls was one from the CIA, which contracted Blackwater to work in Afghanistan in the early stages of US operations there. In the ensuing years the company has become one of the greatest beneficiaries of the "war on terror", winning nearly US\$1 billion in noncovert government contracts, many of them no-bid arrangements. In just a decade Prince has expanded the Moyock headquarters to 7,000 acres, making it the world's largest private military base. Blackwater currently has 2,300 personnel deployed in nine countries, with 20,000 other contractors at the ready. It has a fleet of more than 20 aircraft, including helicopter gunships and a private intelligence division, and is manufacturing surveillance blimps and target systems.

In 2005 after hurricane Katrina, Blackwater deployed its forces in New Orleans, where it billed the federal government \$950 per man per day—at one point, raking in more than \$240,000 a day. At its peak, the company had about 600 contractors deployed from Texas to Mississippi. Since Katrina, it has aggressively pursued domestic contracting, opening a new domestic operations division. Blackwater is marketing its products and services to the Department of Homeland Security, and its representatives have met with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The company has applied for operating licences in all US coastal states. Blackwater is also expanding its physical presence inside US borders, opening facilities in Illinois and California.

Its largest obtainable government contract is with the State Department, for providing security to US diplomats and facilities in Iraq. That contract began in 2003 with the company's \$21 million no-bid deal to protect Iraq proconsul Paul Bremer. Blackwater has guarded the two subsequent US ambassadors, John Negroponte and Zalmay Khalilzad, as well as other diplomats and occupation offices. Its forces have protected more than 90 congressional delegations in Iraq, including that of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. According to the latest government contract records, since June 2004 Blackwater has been awarded \$750 million in State Department contracts alone. It is currently engaged in an intensive lobbying campaign to be sent into Darfur as a privatised peacekeeping force. Last October, President Bush lifted some sanctions on Christian southern Sudan, paving the way for a potential Blackwater training mission there. In January, the Washington, DC, representative for southern Sudan's regional government said he expected Blackwater to begin training the south's security forces soon.

Since 9/11, Blackwater has hired some well-connected officials close to the Bush Administration as senior executives. Among them are J. Cofer Black, former head of counterterrorism at the CIA and the man who led the hunt for Osama bin Laden after 9/11, and Joseph Schmitz, former Pentagon Inspector General, who was responsible for policing contractors like Blackwater during much of the "war on terror"—something he stood accused of not doing effectively. By the end of Schmitz's tenure, powerful Republican Senator Charles Grassley launched a congressional probe into whether Schmitz had "quashed or redirected two ongoing criminal investigations" of senior Bush Administration

officials. Under bipartisan fire, Schmitz resigned [in September 2005] and signed up with Blackwater.

Despite its central role, Blackwater had largely operated in the shadows until March 31, 2004, when four of its private soldiers in Iraq were ambushed and killed in Fallujah. A mob then burned the bodies and dragged them through the streets, stringing up two from a bridge over the Euphrates. In many ways, it was the moment the Iraq War turned. US forces laid siege to Fallujah days later, killing hundreds of people and displacing thousands, inflaming the fierce Iraqi resistance that haunts occupation forces to this day. For most Americans, it was the first they had heard of private soldiers. "People began to figure out this is quite a phenomenon," said Representative David Price, a North Carolina Democrat, who said he began monitoring the use of private contractors after Fallujah. "I'm probably like most Congress members in kind of coming to this awareness and developing an interest in it" after the incident.

What is not so well-known is that in Washington after the Fallujah incident, Blackwater executives kicked into high gear, capitalising on the company's newfound recognition. The day after the ambush, it hired the Alexander Strategy Group, a K Street lobbying firm run by former senior staffers of then majority leader Tom DeLay before the firm's meltdown in the wake of the Jack Abramoff scandal. A week to the day after the ambush, Erik Prince was sitting down with at least four senior members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, including its chair, John Warner. Senator

Rick Santorum arranged the meeting, which included Warner and two other key Republican senators—Appropriations Committee chair Ted Stevens of Alaska and George Allen of Virginia. This meeting followed an earlier series of face-to-faces Prince had had with powerful House Republicans who oversaw military contracts; among them: DeLay; Porter Goss, chair of the House Intelligence Committee (and future CIA director); Duncan Hunter, chair of the House Armed Services Committee; and Representative Bill Young, chair of the House

Appropriations Committee. What was discussed at these meetings remains a secret. But Blackwater was clearly positioning itself to make the most of its new fame. Indeed, two months later, Blackwater was handed one of the government's most valuable international security contracts, worth more than \$300 million.

The firm was also eager to stake out a role in crafting the rules that would govern mercenaries under US contract. "Because of the public events of March 31, [Blackwater's] visibility and need to communicate a consistent message has elevated here in Washington," said Blackwater's new lobbyist, Chris Bertelli. "There are now several federal regulations that apply to their activities, but they are generally broad in nature. One thing that's lacking is an industry standard. That's something we definitely want to be engaged in." By May, Blackwater was leading a lobbying effort by the private military industry to try to block congressional or Pentagon efforts to place their forces under the military court martial system.

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Blackwater Families Fight Back

But while Blackwater enjoyed its new status as a hero in the "war on terror" within the Administration and the Republican-controlled Congress, the families of the four men killed at Fallujah say they were being stonewalled by Blackwater as they attempted to understand the circumstances of how their loved ones were killed. After what they allege was months of effort to get straight answers from the company, the families filed a groundbreaking wrongful death lawsuit against Blackwater in January 2005, accusing the company of not providing the men with what they say were contractually guaranteed safeguards. Among the allegations: the company sent them on the Fallujah mission that day short by two men, with less powerful weapons than they should have had and in Pajero jeeps instead of armoured vehicles. This case could have far-reaching reverberations and is being monitored closely by the war-contractor industry. Former Halliburton subsidiary KBR [previously Kellogg, Brown and Root] has even filed an *amicus* [*amicus curiae*] brief supporting Blackwater. If the lawsuit is successful, it could pave the way for a tobacco litigation-type scenario, where war contractors find themselves besieged by legal claims of workers killed or injured in war zones.

As the case has made its way through the court system, Blackwater has enlisted powerhouse Republican lawyers to defend it: among them Fred Fielding, who was recently named by Bush as White House counsel, replacing Harriet Miers; and Kenneth Starr, former Whitewater prosecutor investigating President Clinton and the company's current counsel of record. Blackwater has not formally debated the specific allegations in the suit, but what has emerged in its court filings is a series of legal arguments intended to bolster Blackwater's contention that it is essentially above the law. Blackwater claims that if US courts allow the company to be sued for wrongful death, that could threaten the nation's war-fighting capacity: "Nothing could be more destructive of the all-volunteer, Total Force concept underlying US military manpower doctrine than to expose the private components to the tort liability systems of fifty states, transported overseas to foreign battlefields," the company argued in legal papers. In February [2007], Blackwater suffered a major defeat when the Supreme Court declined its appeal to hear the Fallujah case, paving the way for the state trial—where there would be no cap on damages that a jury could award—to proceed.

Congress is beginning to take an interest in this potentially groundbreaking case. On February 7, Representative Henry Waxman chaired hearings of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee. While the hearings were billed as looking at US reliance on military contractors, they largely focused on Blackwater and the Fallujah incident. For the first time, Blackwater was forced to share a venue with the families of the men killed at Fallujah. "Private contractors like Blackwater work outside the scope of the military's chain of command and can literally do whatever they please without any liability or

accountability from the US government," Katy Helvenston, whose son Scott was one of the Blackwater contractors killed, told the committee. "Therefore, Blackwater can continue accepting hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer money from the government without having to answer a single question about its security operators."

Citing the pending litigation, Blackwater's general counsel, Andrew Howell, declined to respond to many of the charges levied against his company by the families and asked several times for the committee to go into closed session. "The men who went on the mission on March 31, each had their weapons and they had sufficient ammunition," Howell told the committee, adding that the men were in "appropriate" vehicles. That was sharply disputed by the men's families, who allege that in order to save \$1.5 million Blackwater did not provide the four with armoured vehicles. "Once the men signed on with Blackwater and were flown to the Middle East, Blackwater treated them as fungible commodities," Helvenston told lawmakers in her emotional testimony, delivered on behalf of all four families.

The issue that put this case on Waxman's radar was the labyrinth of subcontracts underpinning the Fallujah mission. Since November 2004, Waxman had been trying to pin down for whom the Blackwater men were ultimately working on the day of the ambush. "For over eighteen months, the Defense Department wouldn't even respond to my inquiry," said Waxman. "When it finally replied last July, it didn't even supply the breakdown I requested. In fact, it denied that private security contractors did any work at all under the [Pentagon's contracting program]. We now know that isn't true." Waxman's struggle to follow the money on this one contract involving powerful war contractors like KBR provides a graphic illustration of the secretive nature of the whole war contracting industry.

What is not in dispute regarding the Fallujah incident is that Blackwater was working with a Kuwaiti business called

Regency under a contract with the world's largest food services company, Eurest Support Services. ESS is a subcontractor for KBR and another giant war contractor, Fluor, in Iraq under the Pentagon's LOGCAP contracting program. One contract covering Blackwater's Fallujah mission indicated the mission was ultimately a subcontract with KBR. Last summer, KBR denied this. Then ESS wrote to Waxman to say the mission was conducted under Fluor's contract with ESS. Fluor denied that, and the Pentagon told Waxman it didn't know to which company the mission was ultimately linked. Waxman alleged that Blackwater and the other subcontractors were "adding significant markups" to their subcontracts for the same security services that Waxman believes were then charged to US taxpayers. "It's remarkable that the world of contractors and subcontractors is so murky that we can't even get to the bottom of this, let alone calculate how many millions of dollars taxpayers lose in each step of the subcontracting process," said Waxman.

While it appeared for much of the February 7 hearing that the contract's provenance would remain obscure, that changed when,

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at the end of the hearing, the Pentagon revealed that the original contractor was, in fact, KBR. In violation of military policy against LOGCAP contractors' using private forces for security instead of US troops, KBR had entered into a subcontract with ESS that was protected by Blackwater; those costs were allegedly passed on to US taxpayers to the tune of \$19.6 million. Blackwater said it billed ESS \$2.3 million for its services, meaning a mark-up of more than \$17 million was ultimately passed on to the government. Three weeks after the hearing, KBR told shareholders it may be forced to repay up to \$400 million to the government as a result of an ongoing US Army investigation.

It took more than two years for Waxman to get an answer to a simple question: whom were US taxpayers paying for services? But, as the Fallujah lawsuit shows, it is not just money at issue. It is human life.

A Killing on Christmas Eve

While much of the publicity Blackwater has received stems from Fallujah, another more recent incident is attracting new scrutiny. On Christmas Eve [2006] inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, an American Blackwater contractor allegedly shot and killed an Iraqi bodyguard protecting a senior Iraqi official. For weeks after the shooting, unconfirmed reports circulated around the Internet that alcohol may have been involved and that the Iraqi was shot 10 times in the chest. The story then went that the contractor was spirited out of Iraq before he could be prosecuted. Media inquiries got nowhere: the US Embassy refused to confirm that it was a Blackwater contractor, and the company refused to comment.

Then the incident came up at the February 7 congressional hearing. As the session was drawing to a close, Representative Kucinich raced back into the room with what he said was a final question. He entered a news report on the incident into the record and asked Blackwater counsel Howell if Blackwater had flown the contractor out of Iraq after the alleged shooting.

"That gentleman, on the day the incident occurred, he was off duty," Howell said, in what was the first official confirmation of the incident from Blackwater. "Blackwater did bring him back to the United States."

"Is he going to be extradited back to Iraq for murder, and, if not, why not?" Kucinich asked.

"Sir, I am not law enforcement. All I can say is that there's currently an investigation," Howell replied. "We are fully cooperating and supporting that investigation."

Kucinich then said: "I just want to point out that there's a question that could actually make [Blackwater's] corporate officers accessories here in helping to create a flight from justice for someone who's committed a murder."

The War on the Hill

Several bills are now making their way through Congress aimed at oversight and transparency of the private forces that have emerged as major players in the wars of the post-9/11 period. In mid-February, Senators Byron Dorgan, Patrick Leahy and John Kerry introduced legislation aimed at cracking down on no-bid contracts and cronyism, providing for penalties of up to 20 years in prison and fines of up to \$1 million for what they called "war

profiteering". It is part of what Democrats describe as a multi-pronged approach. "I think there's a critical mass of us now who are working on it," said Congressman Price, who represents Blackwater's home state. In January, Price introduced legislation that would expand the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act of 2000 (MEJA) to include all contractors in a war zone, not just those working for or alongside the armed forces. Most of Blackwater's work in Iraq, for instance, is contracted by the State Department. Price indicated that the alleged Christmas Eve shooting could be a test case of sorts under his legislation. "I will be following this and I'll be calling for a full investigation," he said.

But there's at least one reason to be wary of this approach: Price's office consulted with the private military lobby as it crafted the legislation, which has the industry's strong endorsement. Perhaps that's because MEJA has been for the most part unenforced. "Even in situations when US civilian law could potentially have been applied to contractor crimes, it wasn't,"

observed P. W. Singer, a leading scholar on contractors. American prosecutors are already strapped for resources in their home districts. How could they be expected to conduct complex investigations in Iraq? Who will protect the investigators and prosecutors? How will they interview Iraqi victims? How could they effectively oversee 100,000 individuals spread across a dangerous war zone? "It's a good question," concedes Price. "I'm not saying that it would be a simple matter." He argues his legislation is an attempt to "put the whole contracting enterprise on a new

accountable footing".

This past fall [autumn], taking a different tack—much to the dismay of the industry—Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, an Air Force Reserve lawyer and former Reserve judge, quietly inserted language into the 2007 Defense Authorization, which Bush signed into law, that places contractors under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), commonly known as the court martial system. Graham implemented the change with no public debate and with almost no awareness among the broader Congress, but war contractors immediately questioned its constitutionality. Indeed, this could be a rare moment when mercenaries and civil libertarians are on the same side. Many contractors are not armed combatants; they work in food, laundry and other support services. While the argument could be made that armed contractors like those working for Blackwater should be placed under the UCMJ, Graham's change could result in a dishwasher from Nepal working for KBR being prosecuted like a US soldier. On top of all this, the military has enough trouble policing its own massive force and could scarcely be expected to monitor an additional 100,000 private personnel. Besides, many contractors in Iraq are there under the auspices of the State Department and other civilian agencies, not the military.

In an attempt to clarify these matters, Senator Barack Obama introduced comprehensive new legislation in February. It requires clear rules of engagement for armed contractors, expands MEJA and provides for the DoD to "arrest and detain" contractors suspected of crimes and then turn them over to civilian authorities for prosecution. It also requires the Justice Department to submit a comprehensive report on current investigations of contractor abuses, the number of complaints received about contractors and

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criminal cases opened. In a statement to *The Nation*, Obama said contractors are "...operating with unclear lines of authority, out-of-control costs and virtually no oversight by Congress. This black hole of accountability increases the danger to our troops and American civilians serving as contractors." He said his legislation would "re-establish control over these companies" while "bringing contractors under the rule of law".

Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky, a member of the House Intelligence Committee, has been a leading critic of the war contracting system. Her Iraq and Afghanistan Contractor Sunshine Act, introduced in February, which bolsters Obama's, boils down to what Schakowsky sees as a long overdue fact-finding mission through the secretive contracting bureaucracy. Among other provisions, it requires the government to determine and make public: the number of contractors and subcontractors (at any tier) who are employed in Iraq and Afghanistan; any host country's, international or US laws that have been broken by contractors; disciplinary actions taken against contractors; and the total number of dead and wounded contractors. Schakowsky said she has tried repeatedly over the past several years to get this information and has been stonewalled or ignored. "We're talking about billions and billions of dollars—some have estimated forty cents of every dollar [spent on the occupation] goes to these contractors, and we couldn't get any information on casualties, on deaths," said Schakowsky. "It has been virtually impossible to shine the light on this aspect of the war and so when we discuss the war, its scope, its costs, its risks, they have not been part of this whatsoever. This whole shadow force that's been operating in Iraq, we know almost nothing about. I think it keeps at arm's length from the American people what this war is all about."

While not by any means a comprehensive total of the number of contractor casualties, 770 contractor deaths and 7,761 injured in Iraq as of December 31, 2006, were confirmed by the Labor Department. But that only counts those contractors whose families applied for benefits under the government's Defense Base Act insurance. Independent analysts say the number is likely much higher. Blackwater alone has lost at least 27 men in Iraq. And then there's the financial cost: almost \$4 billion in taxpayer funds have been paid for private security forces in Iraq, according to Waxman. Yet even with all these additional forces, the military is struggling to meet the demands of a White House bent on military adventurism.

A week after Donald Rumsfeld's rule at the Pentagon ended, US forces had been stretched so thin by the "war on terror" that former Secretary of State Colin Powell declared "the active Army is about broken". Rather than rethinking its foreign policies, the Administration forged ahead with plans for a troop "surge" in Iraq, and Bush floated a plan to supplement the military with a Civilian Reserve Corps in his January State of the Union address. "Such a corps would function much like our military Reserve. It would ease the burden on the armed forces by allowing us to hire civilians with critical skills to serve on missions abroad when America needs them," Bush said. The President, it seemed, was just giving a fancy new title to something the Administration has already done with its "revolution" in military affairs and unprecedented reliance on contractors. Yet while Bush's proposed

surge has sparked a fierce debate in Congress and among the public, the Administration's increasing reliance on private military contractors has gone largely undebated and underreported.

"The increasing use of contractors, private forces or as some would say 'mercenaries' makes wars easier to begin and to fight—it just takes money and not the citizenry," said Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, which has sued contractors for alleged abuses in Iraq. "To the extent a population is called upon to go to war, there is resistance, a necessary resistance to prevent wars of self-aggrandizement, foolish wars and, in the case of the United States, hegemonic imperialist wars. Private forces are almost a necessity for a United States bent on retaining its declining empire."

With talk of a Civilian Reserve Corps and Blackwater promoting the idea of a privatized "contractor brigade" to work with the military, war critics in Congress are homing in on what they see as a sustained, undeclared escalation through the use of private forces. "Surge" implies a bump that has a beginning and an end," said

Schakowsky. "Having a third or a quarter of [the forces] present on the ground not even part of the debate is a very dangerous thing in our democracy, because war is the most critical thing that we do."

Indeed, contractor deaths are not counted in the total US death count, and their crimes and violations go undocumented and unpunished, further masking the true costs of the war. "When you're bringing in contractors whom the law doesn't apply to, the Geneva Conventions, common notions of morality, everything's thrown out

the window," said Kucinich. "And what it means is that these private contractors are really an arm of the Administration and its policies."

Kucinich said he plans to investigate the potential involvement of private forces in so-called "black bag", "false flag" or covert operations in Iraq. "What's the difference between covert activities and so-called overt activities which you have no information about? There's no difference," he says. Kucinich also says the problems with contractors are not simply limited to oversight and transparency. "It's the privatization of war," he said. The Administration is "...linking private war contractor profits with warmaking. So we're giving incentives for the contractors to lobby the Administration and the Congress to create more opportunities for profits, and those opportunities are more war. And that's why the role of private contractors should be sharply limited by Congress."

About the Author:

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